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Presence of *Burkholderia pseudomallei* in Soil, Nigeria, 2019

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Melioidosis, caused by the soil-dwelling bacterium *Burkholderia pseudomallei*, is predicted to be endemic in Nigeria but is only occasionally reported. This report documents the systematic identification of the presence of *B. pseudomallei* and *B. thailandensis* in the soil across multiple states in Nigeria.

The gram-negative, soil-dwelling bacterium *Burkholderia pseudomallei* is the causative agent of melioidosis, which is an important cause of lethal community-acquired sepsis throughout the tropics (1). Melioidosis is predicted to be endemic in Nigeria, a country with the highest estimated annual incidence, mortality, and disease burden in Africa, partly explained by its suitable environment and large population (2–4). Clinical evidence of melioidosis in Nigeria is scarce and based only on traveler-associated cases in the United Kingdom and reports from Nigeria presuming the presence of *B. pseudomallei* (4–7). This study was a collaborative effort prompted by the African Melioidosis Workshop in Lagos, Nigeria (4); our goal was to determine the environmental presence of *B. pseudomallei* in Nigeria. Ethics approval was obtained from the National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria (approval no. NHREC/01/01/2007-26/03/2019).

We performed an environmental soil sampling study based on consensus guidelines for the identification of *B. pseudomallei* (8). We consulted local residents and maps to select sites associated with the occurrence of *B. pseudomallei*, as we have done previously (9). Using a fixed interval grid and samples taken 5 meters apart, we collected 100 soil samples per site across 8 sites in Nigeria during the rainy season in April–May 2019 (Table; Appendix, <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/EID/article/29/5/22-1138-App1.pdf>). We collected a total of 800 samples in the northwestern state Kebbi, southwestern state Ogun, and southeastern states Ebonyi and Enugu. We collected soil at a depth of 65 cm and processed 10 g of soil within 7 days to enable selective enriched culture (8,10). We screened isolates by using colony morphology and, if results were suspect, used matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization-time of flight mass spectrometry (MALDI Biotyper Compass v4.1 and Compass Library v10; Bruker Daltonics, <https://www.bruker.com>). We subjected all presumptive *B. pseudomallei* isolates to real-time multiplex PCR and performed whole-genome sequencing on 9 *B. pseudomallei* isolates and 3 *B. thailandensis* isolates by using the NextSeq 500/550 platform (Illumina, <https://www.illumina.com>) (Appendix). We then included

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Table. Site characteristics and distribution of *Burkholderia pseudomallei* at 8 sampling sites in Nigeria, 2019

| Site | Location | State | Place | Site characteristics | Sample holes positive for <i>B. pseudomallei</i> |
|------|--------------|--------|---------------|--|--|
| A | Southwestern | Ogun | Lufoko | Rice field, dry | 0 |
| B | Southwestern | Ogun | Ige | Rice field, dry | 0 |
| C | Northwestern | Kebbi | Birnin Kebbi* | Rice field, moist | 4 |
| D | Northwestern | Kebbi | Birnin Kebbi* | Rice field, moist | 1 |
| E | Southwestern | Ogun | Sunmoge | Cattle, grassland next to river, moist | 0 |
| F | Southeastern | Ebonyi | Abakaliki | Rice field and cassava crops, moist | 38 |
| G | Southeastern | Ebonyi | Abakaliki | Rice swamp, wet | 1 |
| H | Southeastern | Enugu | Nenwe | Rice field, moist | 14 |

*The sampling sites in Birnin Kebbi were located 3 km apart from each other. An overview of the geographic distribution of sampling sites for *Burkholderia pseudomallei* can be found in the Appendix (<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/EID/article/29/5/22-1138-App1.pdf>).

the same *B. pseudomallei* isolates in our phylogenetic comparison and used them for antimicrobial susceptibility testing (Appendix). Sequences for the samples in this study are available on the European Nucleotide Archive database (project number PRJEB54705, sample accession nos. ERS12451640–51; <https://www.ebi.ac.uk/ena/browser/home>).

By using the methods described, we isolated *B. pseudomallei* from 58 (7.3%) of 800 samples in 5 (62.5%) of the 8 sampling sites (Table; Appendix). We observed the highest positivity in the southeastern states, with rates as high as 38% in Ebonyi and 14% in Enugu. We also isolated the nonpathogenic *B. thailandensis* from 193 (24.1%) of 800 samples in 4 (50%) of the 8 sampling sites. Antimicrobial susceptibility of the *B. pseudomallei* isolates displayed overall sensitivity against

antibiotic agents commonly used for the treatment of melioidosis, such as ceftazidime, meropenem, and trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole (Appendix).

We conducted phylogenetic analysis of our 9 sequenced *B. pseudomallei* isolates and 13 additional genomes originating from Africa, all retrieved from the European Nucleotide Archive database. The phylogenetic tree revealed a cluster of predominantly continental Africa origin that included all of the soil isolates from Nigeria and a cluster of strains derived mainly from the Indian Ocean region (Figure). Our *B. pseudomallei* isolates did not closely match the previously sequenced traveler-associated strain from Nigeria (ERR298772) (7); the genome differed by 8,370 to 9,431 core single-nucleotide polymorphisms. We speculated that the higher positivity in the southeastern states reflects the relative-

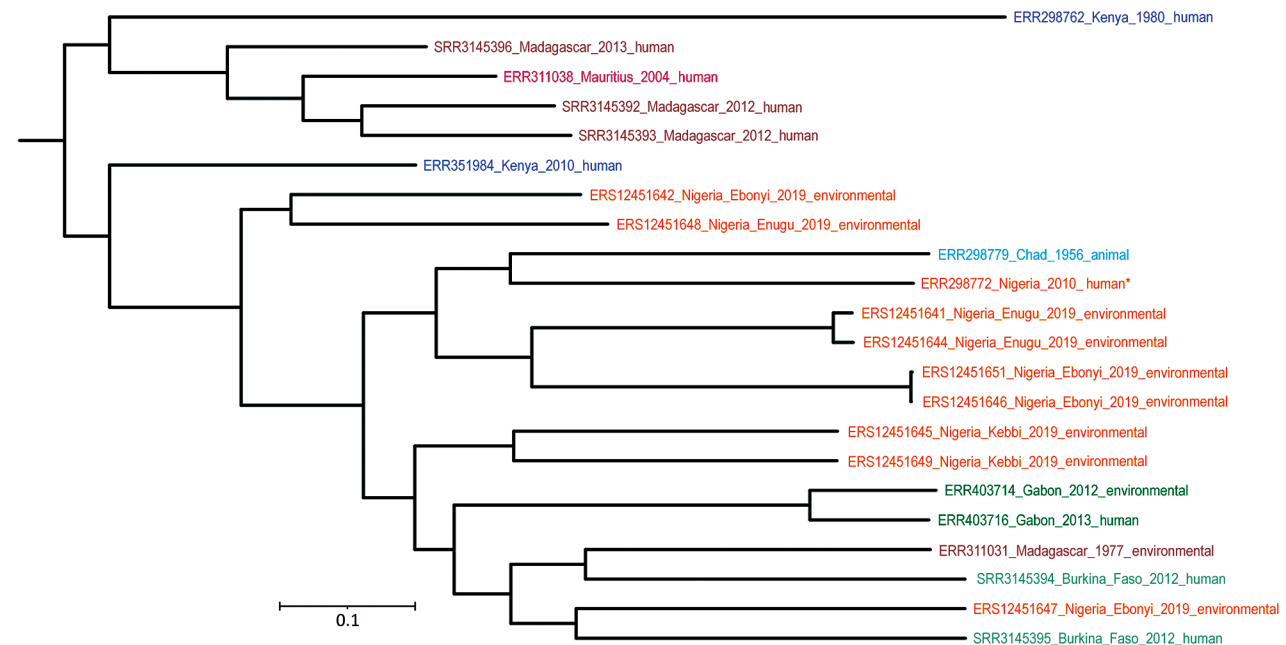


Figure. Phylogenetic tree of *Burkholderia pseudomallei* genomes from Nigeria (orange text) and additional genomes originating from Africa, all retrieved from the European Nucleotide Archive database. Tree generated by FastTree (<http://www.microbesonline.org/fasttree>) based on core single-nucleotide polymorphisms distance and visualized with iTOL (<https://itol.embl.de>). Colors indicate countries of origin. Asterisk indicates a previously sequenced, traveler-associated strain. Scale bar indicates number of nucleotide substitutions per site.

ly high annual precipitation in southeastern Nigeria as compared with sampling sites in the northwestern and southwestern states (Appendix).

Adopting a culture-based approach, combined with matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization-time of flight mass spectrometry, real-time PCR, and whole genome sequencing allowed us to identify the environmental presence of *B. pseudomallei*. Limitations of our study include possible sampling errors and false-negative samples because we relied on a culture-based approach instead of using an additional quantitative PCR on soil samples (9). Moreover, we did not collect soil samples in multiple seasons to investigate a seasonal pattern, nor did we collect water or air samples.

In conclusion, we documented the systematic confirmation of the environmental presence of *B. pseudomallei* and *B. thailandensis* across multiple states in Nigeria. We identified the highest *B. pseudomallei* positivity rates in the southeastern states Ebonyi and Enugu. Phylogenetic analysis clustered our *B. pseudomallei* isolates with previous genomes that originated mostly from continental Africa. Our results highlight the probability of unrecognized melioidosis in Nigeria and warrant the attention of health workers and public health officials. Improving capacity and increasing awareness, together with environmental, serologic, and disease surveillance, is needed to increase our understanding of the melioidosis burden within Nigeria.

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Appendix

Climatological Data

Appendix Table 1. Annual mean temperature and precipitation of sampled states in Nigeria (1991–2020)

| Location | State | Annual mean temperature (°C) | Annual precipitation (mm) |
|--------------|--------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Northwestern | Kebbi | 28.71 | 849.46 |
| Southwestern | Ogun | 27.55 | 1367.16 |
| Southeastern | Enugu | 26.85 | 1822.48 |
| Southeastern | Ebonyi | 26.88 | 1966.70 |

Annual mean temperature and precipitation data of Nigeria (1991–2020) is derived from the Climate Change Knowledge Portal of the World Bank Group (1).

Polymerase Chain Reaction

We performed a TaqMan real-time multiplex polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) assay on all presumptive *B. pseudomallei* isolates based on colony morphology and matrix assisted laser desorption/ionization-time of flight mass spectrometry (Bruker Daltonics). We optimized a previously described RT-PCR assay with several modifications as discussed hereafter (2). The gene targets were as follows: *Orf11* for *B. pseudomallei*, a hypothetical 16.5 kDa protein for *B. mallei*, and *fliC* for *B. pseudomallei*, *B. mallei*, and *B. thailandensis*. The species-specific primers were modified to optimize the reaction (**Appendix Table 2**). The reaction volume of 20 µL consisted of 10 µL SensiFast master mix (Bioline), 5 µL primers-probes mix, and 5 µL of bacterial DNA. We extracted DNA of five colonies in 100 µL AE-buffer (Qiagen) at 100°C for 30 minutes. Bacterial lysates of several colonies were diluted a 100-fold with TE-buffer before being added to the final reaction volume. The primers-probes mix was prepared in TE-buffer to a final concentration of 2 pmol/µl for primers and 0.4 pmol/µl for probes. We included a positive control that consisted of a mix of *B. pseudomallei* and *B. mallei*, a no template control, and an

internal control using the nucleotide sequence of the seal herpesvirus type 1 (PhHV) to check for inhibition of the reaction (3). The PCR reaction was run on a LightCycler 480 II (Roche) with a denaturation cycle of 5 minutes at 95°C followed by 45 amplification cycles of 10 seconds at 95°C and 30 seconds at 60°C. An isolate was considered positive when the exponential phase was reached.

Appendix Table 2. Overview of primers and probes of the multiplex RT-PCR for *Burkholderia* species

| Target species | Target gene | Nucleotide sequence | Fluorescent label |
|---|----------------------|---|-------------------|
| <i>B. pseudomallei</i> | <i>Orf11</i> forward | 5'- ACA AGT GGC CCT ATG GAT TG -3' | FAM-BHQ1 |
| | <i>Orf11</i> reverse | 5'- TCG GTT TCG AAT AAC GGG TA -3' | |
| | <i>Orf11</i> probe | 5'- ACG ATC TCC GAG AAC GCA CTG AAC A -3' | |
| <i>B. mallei</i> | 16.5 kDa forward | 5'- CGA GCT CAG CAA CCT CGT TA -3' | Texas Red-BHQ1 |
| | 16.5 kDa reverse | 5'- CGC GGT CTA CCT TGC ATA TT -3' | |
| | 16.5 kDa probe | 5'- CAG TAT CCA GGT TTC ACC GCG CTC GAC -3' | |
| <i>B. pseudomallei</i> , <i>B. mallei</i> , and <i>B. thailandensis</i> | <i>fliC</i> forward | 5'- GTC AAC AAI CTG CAG GCA AC -3' | ATTO532-BHQ1 |
| | <i>fliC</i> reverse | 5'- CGG TTT CCT GAG IAA AGT ML -3' | |
| | <i>fliC</i> probe | 5'- GGC TCG AAC AAC CTC GCG CAR G -3' | |
| PhHV | PhHV forward | 5'- GGG CGA ATC ACA GAT TGA ATC -3' | Cy5-BHQ2 |
| | PhHV reverse | 5'- GCG GTT CCA AAC GTA CCA A -3' | |
| | PhHV probe | 5'- TTT TTA TGT GTC CGC CAC CAT CTG GAT C -3' | |

Whole-Genome Sequencing

We performed whole-genome sequencing (WGS) on nine *B. pseudomallei* and three *B. thailandensis* isolates using the following methods. We extracted DNA of a loopful of bacteria in 100 µL AE-buffer at 100°C for 30 minutes. Sequences were obtained using the NextSeq 500/550 platform (Illumina). After demultiplexing, low-quality reads were discarded and adaptor sequences were trimmed using Trimmomatic v0.39 (4). High quality reads were used for de novo assembly using SKESA v2.4.0 (5). Contigs smaller than 500 bp were discarded for the following analyses. Quality of the assemblies was assessed using Quast v5.0.2 (6). The sequencing depth was determined by mapping the raw sequencing reads of each isolate to their respective final assembly contigs using minimap2 v2.17 (7), then calculating the genome coverage using SAMtools v1.14 and BEDtools v2.30.0 (8,9). SNP analysis was performed using kSNP3 v3.1.2 and visualized using FastTree v2.0 and iTOL v6 (<https://itol.embl.de/>) (10–12). Species identification was confirmed based on WGS data using the software KmerFinder v3.0.2 of the Center for Genomic Epidemiology (<https://cge.food.dtu.dk/services/KmerFinder/>) (13–15).

Based on WGS analysis, we phylogenetically characterized nine *B. pseudomallei* isolates. Additional *B. pseudomallei* genomes originating from Africa with known countries were identified via the literature and downloaded from the European Nucleotide Archive database (<https://www.ebi.ac.uk/ena/browser/home>) (16,17). We excluded the *B. thailandensis* isolates from further phylogenetic comparisons.

Multi Locus Sequence Typing

Multi locus sequence typing (MLST) was performed on the nine sequenced *B. pseudomallei* isolates using the software MLST v2.0.9 of the Center for Genomic Epidemiology (<https://cge.food.dtu.dk/services/MLST/>) (Appendix Table 3) (21). Raw sequencing reads were used as data input and the minimum depth for an allele was set at five times. Information on loci and gene function used in the *B. pseudomallei* MLST scheme can be found elsewhere (22). Next, the *B. pseudomallei* PubMLST curator and database were consulted to assign sequence types (STs) and to resolve any queries regarding imperfect matches or novel alleles (<https://pubmlst.org/organisms/burkholderia-pseudomallei>) (23).

Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing

We performed antimicrobial susceptibility testing on the nine sequenced *B. pseudomallei* isolates following the guidelines for *B. pseudomallei* of the European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing (EUCAST) (18–20). We used the following antibiotic disks (Becton Dickinson) with disk content between parenthesis: amoxicillin-clavulanic acid (20–10 µg), ceftazidime (10 µg), imipenem (10 µg), meropenem (10 µg), tetracycline (30 µg), chloramphenicol (30 µg), trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (1.25–23.75 µg), and gentamicin (10 µg). Of note: gentamicin is not included in the recommendations of EUCAST but was included as an additional control measure as we used Ashdown's selective agar for bacterial isolation. Up to four disks were placed per Mueller-Hinton (MHE) agar plate (bioMérieux). Isolates with unexpected antibiotic resistance were subjected to gradient strip testing (Liofilchem) to establish the minimal inhibitory concentration (MIC) following the previously described methods. Quality control was included as per EUCAST's instructions.

Appendix Table 3. Multi locus sequence typing of *Burkholderia pseudomallei* isolates: sequence types and allelic profiles

| Sample ID | ENA accession number | ST | Allelic profile | | | | | | |
|-----------|----------------------|----------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|-----|
| | | | ace | gltB | gmhD | lepA | lipA | narK | ndh |
| BpsC1 | ERS12451645 | 930 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 1 |
| BpsC2* | ERS12451649 | 12* | 1 | 1 | 13 | 1 | 5 | 1* | 1 |
| BpsF1 | ERS12451642 | 1720 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| BpsF2 | ERS12451647 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 13 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 1 |
| BpsF3 | ERS12451651 | 2023 | 1 | 1 | 19 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| BpsG1 | ERS12451646 | 2023 | 1 | 1 | 19 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| BpsH1 | ERS12451644 | 2024 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 152 | 1 |
| BpsH2* | ERS12451648 | Unknown* | 1 | 12 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1* | 1 |
| BpsH3 | ERS12451641 | 2026 | 1 | 1 | 10 | 1 | 5 | 149 | 1 |

*Imperfect narK hit so ST cannot be trusted. Allelic profiles of isolates with an imperfect hit were not uploaded to the PubMLST database.
Abbreviations: ENA = European Nucleotide Archive, ST = sequence type.

Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing

Antimicrobial susceptibility of sequenced *B. pseudomallei* isolates displayed overall sensitivity against antibiotic agents commonly used for treatment of melioidosis, such as ceftazidime, meropenem, and trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (**Appendix Table 4**). However, using the disk diffusion method unexpected antimicrobial resistance was observed against meropenem in one *B. pseudomallei* isolate. MIC testing using gradient strips did not confirm meropenem resistance as an MIC of 2 mg/L was observed (breakpoint resistance: >2 mg/L).

Appendix Table 4. Antimicrobial susceptibility of *Burkholderia pseudomallei* isolates following EUCAST's disk diffusion methods

| Susceptibility testing | | | EUCAST breakpoints | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------|---------|
| Antibiotic agent | Disk content (µg) | Sensitive isolates | Zone diameter range (mm) | S ≥(mm) | R <(mm) |
| Amoxicillin-clavulanic acid | 20–10 | 9/9 | 25–30 | 50 | 22 |
| Ceftazidime | 10 | 9/9 | 22–28 | 50 | 18 |
| Imipenem | 10 | 9/9 | 31–37 | 29 | 29 |
| Meropenem* | 10 | 8/9* | 22–31 | 24 | 24 |
| Tetracycline* | 30 | 9/9 | 26–34 | 23 | 23 |
| Chloramphenicol | 30 | 9/9 | 26–30 | 50 | 22 |
| Trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole | 1.25–23.75 | 9/9 | 30–42 | 50 | 17 |
| Gentamicin* | 10 | 0/9 | 0–0 | NA | NA |

*Meropenem resistance was not confirmed using a minimal inhibitory concentration test. Tetracycline is used to screen for doxycycline susceptibility. Gentamicin is not included in EUCAST's breakpoints for *B. pseudomallei*.

Abbreviations: S = sensitive, R = resistant, NA = not applicable.

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Appendix Figure. Geographic distribution of sampling sites for *Burkholderia pseudomallei* in Nigeria, 2019. Numbers indicate multiple sampling sites. Made with QGIS using Natural Earth data.